

WORLD MUSICIAN GUY MENDILOW

A two-part interview with Guy Mendilow by Kerry Dexter

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PART I

Guy Mendilow was born in Israel, spent part of his growing up years there and in South Africa, as a teenager toured the world with The American Boychoir, went to college in Ohio, lived for a time in Brazil, and now calls the Boston area home. He's a musician and an educator. *Skyland*, the **Guy Mendilow Band**'s current recording, emphasizes Mendilow's interest in sound, and in using lyrics as an instrumental color, and melds his varied cultural and musical experiences. "I encourage you to ignore the lyrics of these songs, at least at first, and see where the music takes you," he says. With Mendilow's own diverse background and other artists in the band who bring in experiences from Japan to Cajun country, it is an around the world journey that opens doors to listening while still creating a distinct sense of presence and shared ideas. Most of the music was recorded in an old farmhouse in the Berkshires of Massachusetts, with the



band on a limited budget, working long days, and doing the engineering, as well as the music, themselves. That sense of connection and community come through in music with lyrics that might be in Spanish and Yiddish, with rhythms that might be African, Cajun, or come from the blues.

"*Skyland* is a snapshot of the band at a particular moment," Mendilow says. "I knew that I wanted to feature certain textures, like the berimbau [a sort of musical bow and arrow], and overtone singing [in which one singer creates several tones at once], and Andy's jaw harp playing [Andy is Andy Bergman, who plays clarinet, bamboo flute, and other woodwinds with the band]. My growing interest in new arrangements of old Sephardic music led me to want to include several cuts of that nature. And I knew that I wanted songs that were playful as well as serious, to capture some of the strange sense of humour that is such a big part of this band. So we chose those tunes that met the criteria, and even wrote one or two specifically for the album." One of those was a piece called *Express*, which is "a tune



that features Andy on a truly funky-sounding three pronged jaw harp - it's hard to believe that electronica sound comes from one simple acoustic instrument!" he says.

Mendilow sees his musical mission as creating connections and opening doors for understanding across zzzcultures. The band does that through their music in concert and on record, and through working with international peacemaking organizations such as **Seeds for Peace**, which helps forge connections between Israeli and Palestinian educators and students. Mendilow has also found himself drawn to giving workshops, teaching both educators and children. His father is a professor, whose worldwide assignments led to Mendilow's early experiences living in different cultures. Still, *"Oddly enough, I was never really interested in teaching until I became involved with environmental activism. At Oberlin College, I majored in Environmental Studies. That's like majoring in a study of crisis and failure. I came away with a firm conviction that, beyond green technologies and sustainable policies, so much of what was needed was a different kind of vision, one that starts with a different kind of leadership. And, the more I learned about art education in different parts of the world, from Reggio Emilia in Italy to Paulo Freire in Brazil, I became convinced that the arts had a role to play in this,"* he says. *"Used in certain ways, the arts can help nurture the type of leadership and self-esteem that I feel is so needed. These beliefs guided me in my first artist residencies ten years ago, and led me to my Masters in Music degree and certification in Dalcroze Eurhythmics, in which I wound up focusing on musical improvisation as a tool for cross-cultural communication.*

*"Dalcroze Eurhythmics is a vibrant, joyful approach to teaching both music and **musicality**, built on the premise that music is, first and foremost, a physical phenomenon. If a person can know how an element of music feels, in their own body and on their own terms, they can develop a knowledge of it that goes deeper than an abstract understanding. Dalcroze teaches music from the ground up,"* he explains, *"adding intellectual understanding only once a student has a strong, direct physical experience. It's like treating the body as the primary instrument. Dalcroze Eurhythmics is also all about improvisation. Students in a Dalcroze session make music right from the start, no matter how much they have under their belt. If you've got just one note, you can already make music!"*

Coming up: part two of our conversation with musician and educator Guy Mendilow, in which he talks about the teacher's eye view of preparing for workshops which include a lot of improvisation, how teaching musical skill and developing leadership are connected, and why this world citizen now calls Boston home.



PART II

Guy Mendilow is a musician who is passionate about exploring sounds across cultures. He is a world citizen himself, growing up following his professor father's assignments from Israel, where he was born, to South Africa and the United States, and also living for a time in Brazil. On his latest album, *Skyland*, Mendilow includes music that mixes ideas from those cultures, Yiddish songs from a guest vocalist, Cajun accordion and bamboo flute from regular band members, and his own overtone singing along with a range of other instruments and styles. Recently, he has been exploring the music of the Sephardic Jews, itself a mix which includes **Arabic, Turkish, Hebrew, and Spanish elements**, and that's featured on the recording as well. The five band members and two guest artists create a collection which is, as Mendilow prefers, focused on meaning of sound before meaning of lyric. The result is a challenging and engaging mix which ends up being focused on peace. It comes as no surprise, then, that the band often partners with organizations dedicated to peace and cultural understanding.



In an earlier conversation at Wandering Educators, Mendilow spoke about the recording, and also about a related passion of his: teaching. Whether he is working with four year old children or forty year old educators, he reaches them through the principles of **Dalcroze Eurhythmics**, which is based on the idea that understanding of music starts with how music feels in the body. That has led him to create workshops that are grounded in improvisation. Mendilow, who is certified in Dalcroze Eurhythmics and has a Masters degree in music as well, finds this exciting and fun. Improvisation, by definition, requires student to come up with their own ideas -- and it also means that the teacher has to be ready for just about anything.

“These workshops are a 180 degree spin from a performance, where the focus is on me, and where so much is under my control. In these workshops, the focus is almost entirely on the participants, and you never know who is going to be in the room,” he says. *“The workshop revolves around games that require participants to tune in to one another, to cooperate, and to communicate non-verbally. These games are all about improvisation, whether in movement or music, where each and every player's contribution is vital to the group, where everyone is simultaneously both a leader and a follower, and where the only way to succeed is to work together - to say "yes" in so many ways.”* Mendilow sometimes gives the workshops for the international peacekeeping group *Seeds of Peace*. *“Imagine a group of Palestinian, Egyptian, Jordanian and Israeli educators taking one of these workshops together. Even in a less loaded situation, who knows the twists and turns the group may take! As a facilitator, I must be ready for the unpredictable. It's vital that I take what the group gives me and run with it, whether or not it corresponds exactly to my workshop. So it becomes a test of my own openness and confidence in my ability to make on-the-spot decisions. In the end, so much comes down to trusting my*



musicality, training and experience.” Because of this spontaneity in both students and teacher, he says, “there is more room for magic.”

Part of that magic, Mendilow believes, is found in the way music allows people to learn other skills. *“One of the things I love best about the teachers with whom I’ve been lucky enough to study is that they are concerned with more than just teaching music. They are also committed to teaching through the music,”* he says. Areas such as leadership, teamwork, and the importance of one’s individual contribution to the whole are just a few of the areas where music helps children -- and adults -- grow, he points out. One way to show this *“is simply to conduct individual players on and off during group improvisation, and hear how different the music suddenly becomes with parts missing,”* he says. But more than the method, Mendilow believes, it’s about the teacher and the passion and knowledge the teacher has to share. *“I’ve seen teachers who hold no degrees, no licenses, but who can nonetheless completely transform children’s lives through music,”* he says. *“That’s what I aspire to do.”*

Through making music with his band, composing and arranging music which crosses musical borders, and sharing his passion for the sound and feel of music with children and their teachers, Guy Mendilow is committed to helping people learn music and learn about each other through music. Right now, this world citizen makes his home in Boston. The city has vibrant music and cultural scenes, it’s true, and it’s a good base for touring, but that’s not exactly why he’s living there. He and his wife Shari were moving back to the states from Brazil. *“The truth of the matter is that we live in Boston because my wife has terrible aim,”* he says. *“We left our decision about where to live to fate, threw darts at a map of the US, and she was aiming for California. But that’s another story...”*

www.guymendilow.com

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